

## Some Factors Affecting Comprehension in ESL Reading Classes

著者	MACPHERSON Jeff
journal or publication title	The journal of Nagasaki University of Foreign Studies
number	13
page range	209-216
year	2009-12-30
URL	<a href="http://id.nii.ac.jp/1165/00000167/">http://id.nii.ac.jp/1165/00000167/</a>



# Some Factors Affecting Comprehension in ESL Reading Classes

Jeff MACPHERSON

## 要 約

本稿では、日本の高等教育における英語リーディング授業において、L2学・習者が影響を受ける要因について考察する。

本稿で論じる、L1リーディング習熟度の低さ、読みの遅さ、L2言語イマージョンの学習環境、文化的相違、モチベーションは、ESLにおけるリーディング理解力を左右する多くの要因の一部でしかないが、教師はこうした要因を考慮した上で、ESLリーディング授業における理解力を考える必要がある。リーディングの理解力は外部へ向けて表現されたり、言語化されたりするものではなく、内在化されるものであるため、正確なリーディング理解力の評価は、定量化が困難であると考えられる。ESLリーディング教師は、理解力を評価するだけでなく、自身が良き読書習慣の手本となり、リーディングは楽しく、喜びを伴う活動になり得るものであり、実際そうであるということを示さなければならない。

## Introduction

ESL Reading Comprehension is often measured by questions directed at the students about the materials they are going to read or have been reading, and by informal or formal testing. It is also commonplace to give vocabulary quizzes in reading classes, as a way of measuring the students' ability to learn and memorize new words. Scores or grades obtained from these activities are generally considered good indicators of L2 reading ability and comprehension. Using indicators such as mentioned above may be accurate in English L1 reading classes, but the use of such data collection methods in a second or foreign language may cast doubt over the accuracy and usefulness of these methods. Responses to questions can also be used as indicators of L2 comprehension and retention, but it poses a question about what is being taught. Are we teaching students to read in English, or teaching English with reading purely being a means for conveying the target language? Most educators agree that reading must be learnt, not taught, thus requiring different techniques and appropriately timed intervention in reading classes. However, without personal motivation or drive to read, attempts to make students learn will be fruitless and possibly detrimental to a students' L2 reading attitudes in the future. Furthermore, with reading being quoted as being "unobservable" (Aebersold & Field 1997), and the fact that most reading takes place away from the classroom, it can be argued that creating motivation to read is the key to

building good reading habits, improving reading comprehension, as well as increasing L2 ability on a holistic level.

## **Difficulties With ESL Reading Comprehension**

Poor reading comprehension in ESL reading classes may possibly stem from inadequacies transferred from other aspects of a students' English ability. For example, Hatch (1979, in Birch, 2007) mentions that "There has been research conducted that identifies the connection between the misreading/misinterpretation of words in texts due to inability to differentiate between the different sounds. That is, they cannot hear the difference between /r/ and /l/ sounds, therefore they may mistake light for right and cloud for crowd." This research may strengthen arguments regarding the importance of meaningful reading instruction and intervention in lower leveled students. This evidence suggests that learning to read should help with development of phonetic skills and correct pronunciation, as texts give students examples of correct sounds and word usage in a variety of situations. "A prolonged time lag between oral introduction to a language and the graphic presentation of the material learned can cause problems. Students deprived of any visual support tend to make surreptitious notes of what they think they are hearing, in a form which frequently represents the sounds inaccurately." (Rivers, 1981) Students' reading abilities or habits in their L1 also affect their L2 reading. Royer & Carlo (1991, in August & Shanahan 2008) assert that "There is a transfer of reading skills from the L1 to an L2 and that teaching reading skills in the native language may facilitate the transfer." These skills that transfer from L1 to L2 may also be accompanied by weaknesses or faults. According to Rivers (1981), "When we come to read in another language, we already understand what the process of reading signifies." This may be beneficial and convenient for capable readers, but may lead to added frustration for those who have not been able to grasp the concept of reading and comprehension in their first language.

## **Slow Reading in ESL Classes**

Another common problem witnessed in the ESL classroom is reading too slowly. Tullius (1971, quoting Hatch, 1979, in Birch, 2007) suggested that one reason ESL students take longer to read a passage is that they make more eye fixations per line and they frequently regress to check back on information when they do not understand what they read." This suggestion was applied to an experiment and observation of ESL students concluded that this was not the case. In fact, fixation rates were the same as monolingual students, however the duration of eye fixation was three times that of monolingual students. This led Goodman (1970, in Rivers 1981) to suggest that ESL students take much longer to arrive at a guess

about passage content. "Because the reading text is static students are often tempted to read slowly, worrying about the meaning of each particular word. And yet if they do this they will never achieve the ability to read texts in English in anything but a slow and ponderous way." (Harmer, 1988) This fault on behalf of ESL students may not be the sole cause for slow reading. Consideration of the blatant differences between written English and written Japanese (or other similar Asian languages) need to be accepted as possible contributing factors. First of all, the layout of written materials is completely different to that of English or other European languages. Traditionally, Japanese characters are written from top to bottom on the page, with the columns or sentences being read from the right to the left. Initially, students may experience difficulties in retraining their eyes to not wander down the page, but across it left to right, as in English. This leads to another noticeable difference between written English and written Japanese-the Japanese alphabet. (characters or "kanji") Having only 26 characters in its alphabet, English, to the native English speaker, has been spared the complexity and difficulty of written Japanese. This difference could generally be considered a positive to those who possess English as their first language. Nonetheless, the fact that it is one unknown for L2 learners, amongst possibly many other unknown components, must surely add to the complexity of ESL reading. The amount and frequency of difficulty would obviously vary between beginners and readers displaying higher degrees of ESL competency.

### English Only in ESL Reading Classes

The stipulation that "English only" in ESL reading classes, such as in ESL conversation lessons, may be detrimental to many students' ability to communicate and comprehend reading materials effectively. "Paradoxical as it may seem, Second Language Acquisition (SLA) researchers seem to have neglected the fact that the goal of SLA is bilingualism" (Sridhar & Sridhar, 1986 in Cook, *Linguistics and Second language Acq.* 1993) Pre and post-reading tasks could be more effective if the students' first language is used. Time spent observing silent students due to high levels of difficulty and anxiety could be put to good use: reading the texts or different materials. This may also be a way to increase motivation to read, as the frustration of not being able to express one's knowledge in L2 may drive some to become introverted and unwilling to participate in discussions. This coincides with assumptions that those who are not fluent speakers must also have similar difficulties with reading. As comprehension is something that is renowned for its lack of definition, why must insistence be placed on receiving verbal feedback as a sign of understanding? Often, assumptions must be made, especially when new classes start or new students enroll into an existing class. "Skilled teachers have to be careful observers and need to know as much as possible about the linguistic and educational backgrounds of their students. Sometimes

teachers have to guess or make assumptions." (Aebersold & Field, 1997) These assumptions about levels/ability can be used as a guideline or reference point until the student's ability or skill can be assessed accurately. "Teachers need to work with students while they are reading, using activities that will require them to participate overtly in these (metacognitive/comprehension) processes." (Aebersold & Fields, 1997)

## **Cultural Differences Affecting ESL Reading Comprehension**

Many teachers have come to the conclusion that there are implicit differences in classroom behaviour between Japanese and Western students, especially concerning the ability or readiness to offer answers in class. Western students will usually offer an answer without much trepidation compared to Japanese students. According to this observation, judging a student's comprehension should not solely be based on the ability to offer an answer to a question. It must be remembered that the question "Do you understand?" is negative for those who do not understand, so re-wording of this phrase is essential. This applies not only to ESL students, but to any student in any classroom. "Yes" and "No" responses can be false indicators in a classroom. A "Yes" response may be offered up to remove the focus from the student in question. This shyness or unwillingness to answer questions, in some cases, should perhaps be something that is tolerated or accepted as a cultural difference. Nisbett (2003) recognizes, for example, that the analytical and debating skills of Asian students are somewhat different in comparison to American students. Nisbett added, "For instance, an ex-student was threatened with the possibility of failure in a class due to her lack of responses to questions. The student in question could not see the relationship between her comprehension of the lesson material and her ability to speak up." Nisbett further added "There is certainly a long tradition in the East of equating silence rather than speech with knowledge." Nisbett also made reference to Lao-Tzu, a 6th Century Chinese sage: "He who knows does not speak, he who speaks does not know." (Lao-Tzu in Nisbett 2003) Therefore, consideration needs to be given to cultural differences, as the learning environments ESL teachers experienced in their L1 may have been very different to the environments in which they are now teaching ESL.

## **Improving Reading Comprehension By Creating Motivation to Read**

Motivation is linked to the setting and pursuit of goals. If a student has set short-term or long-term, attainable or attractive goals, they usually possess the motivation to reach or at least pursue their goals. Goal setting is personal, as we all strive to achieve different things for different reasons. "It has often been said by people involved in language teaching that a student who really wants to learn will succeed whatever the circumstances are under

which he studies." (Harmer, 1988) Having set goals that are realistic may provide the extra motivation to continue when times are tough, as previous gains and successes would hopefully be fresh in the minds of those who have tasted success. If a student has not been successful for whatever reason, however, the motivation to quit would be just as high. Harmer also stated, "Teachers, too, must realize the important effect success has on motivation. They must be able to assess the students' ability so they are faced with the right degree of challenge: success in other words should not be too easy or too difficult." Hatch (1979) claims "Students who keep track of their reading speed and comprehension scores are highly motivated to continue making progress that they themselves can see. "Students who do not monitor comprehension as they read invent their own versions of the information in the text and frequently land at destinations other than those chartered by the author." (Aebersold & Field, 1997) In-class recording does work for those who are goal orientated and driven by success. Charts are visual reminders of how a student has progressed and can be easily referred to, enabling students to see how they have improved. Being told you are improving by a teacher is one thing, to witness the evidence firsthand is another.

A student who has no goals or solid reasons for studying, on the other hand, may find the ESL reading process much more difficult and bothersome. "Reading is like an infectious disease: it is caught not taught. (And you can't catch it from someone who hasn't got it.)" (Nuttall 2003) How can we as teachers 'transmit' this disease with such limited time and opportunity? Perhaps the old saying that "Actions speak louder than words" could be applied here. If students see that we enjoy reading, not just textbooks, but reading for pleasure, perhaps they will be motivated by seeing the enjoyment reading gives us. "It is important, then, to have much reading for pleasure, reading for reading's sake, which is not tested at all, that is, reading to develop confidence in reading." (Rivers, 1981) "It is often difficult to convince students of English as a foreign language that texts in English can be understood even though there are vocabulary items and structures the student has never seen before." (Harmer, 1988) We can, however, demonstrate that we too, not as teachers but as readers, from time to time stumble across texts or words that are difficult. Showing students that searching for clues or making guesses about texts is a natural process that all readers go through. "Good language learners are willing, accurate guessers who have a strong desire to communicate, and will attempt to do so even at the risk of appearing foolish." (Ruben, 1975, in Larsen-Freeman 2000) The risk of appearing foolish can be overcome if the ESL classroom environment is conducive to such attempts. Likewise, silence should also be accepted in fairness to those who do not wish to offer suggestions. "The method by which a student is taught must have some effect on their motivation. If they find it deadly boring they will probably become de-motivated, whereas if they have confidence in the method they will find it motivating." (Harmer, 1988) Appropriate textbook selection is extremely important in ESL reading classes in the early stages, as the wrong choice can

dampen spirits for the remainder of a class, term or semester. "Rushing students too soon into reading material beyond their present capacity for fluent comprehension with occasional contextual guessing, which is the ultimate goal, destroys confidence and forces students back to deciphering with a dictionary or word list. (Rivers, 1981) "Language acquisition must be a procedure whereby people use their own thinking processes, or cognition, to discover the rules of the language they are acquiring." (Chomsky, in Larsen-Freeman, 2000)

## Conclusion

There are many factors affecting ESL reading comprehension, those being mentioned in this paper are just to name a few. As teachers, our view of comprehension in ESL reading classes should be reached after considering factors such as those aforementioned. As reading comprehension may be internalized but not expressed outwardly or verbally, a true assessment of comprehension may be difficult to quantify. "Of course ultimately a student's success or failure is in his own hands, but the teacher can influence the course of events in the student's favour." (Harmer, 1988) The pleasure that reading gives is often enough to motivate experienced or skilled readers. However, those who do not fall into these two groups require assistance to reach this level. Goals play an important role in motivation, as with most actions we humans undertake. An ESL reading teacher requires many skills, but must also set examples of good reading habits and demonstrate that reading can be, and is, a fun and rewarding experience. "Our goal should be to show the students where the reading is, and to put them in a position to make use of it." (Krashen & Terrell, 1988)

## References

- Aebersold, J.A. & Field, M. L. (1997) *From Reader to Reading Teacher*, Cambridge University Press
- August, D. & Shanahan, T. (2008) *Developing Reading and Writing in Second Language Learners*, Routledge Publishing
- Birch, B. M. (2007) *English L2 Reading*  
Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers, New Jersey
- Cook, V. (1993) *Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition*,  
MacMillan Publishing
- Harmer, J. (1988) *The Practice of English Language Teaching*,

Longman Publishing

Krashen, S. D. & Terrell, T. D. (1988) *The Natural Approach*,  
Prentice Hall Publishers

Larson-Freeman, D. (2000) *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*, Oxford  
University Press

Nisbett, R.E. (2003) *The Geography of Thought*,  
Free Press, New York

Nuttall, C. (1989) *Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language*,  
Heinemann English Language Teaching

Rivers, W.M. (1981) *Teaching Foreign Language Skills*,  
The University of Chicago Press



